significant manner or made some distinct contribution to the art of the theatre. This has been done simply in the interests of economy.

Many subjects have been mentioned, without being discussed in detail, when they have seemed to fit into the overall pattern. In this sense the book is full of signposts, inviting readers to pursue such subjects as interest them in greater detail. Some suggestions for further reading or investigation are appended to the end of certain sections.

The book is for the most part descriptive and not critical. This is partly a matter of space, but it is also because criticism is a very complicated process, almost as much so as the experience it is describing. A theatrical performance is a highly contrived affair; whatever efforts those concerned may make to give it a sense of reality, they can do no more than manipulate the ingredients of the performance, the words, the gestures, the space they are using, the relationship with the audience. Some people think that the theatre is the most artificial element of all and stage their performance in the open air or in a village hall; but this is no more than to change the nature, not the substance, of the performance. The very fact that the traditional concept of the theatre as a reflection of real life, 'holding a mirror up to nature' as Shakespeare says, is now seriously challenged, points to the complex nature of contemporary criticism.

There is no significant distinction between the words 'playwright' and 'dramatist'. I have preferred the former since the root 'wright' gives a suggestion of craftsmanship as in such words as shipwright and wheelwright.

I must confess to the greatest distaste for the common practice of using the Roman version of Greek names but have reluctantly submitted to the practice for fear of making well-known names unrecognizable. (Would Aeschylus be immediately identifiable as Aischulos?) But I have sometimes put a mild Hellenic gloss on Roman literary imperialism by substituting 'os' for 'us' and 'k' for 'c'.

As for pronunciation, the traditional custom is that if the last syllable but one of a Greek word is long, it will have the stress (Achílles, Agamémnon), but if the last syllable but one is short, the stress will be on the preceding syllable (Aéschylus, Thukídides).

Since the book is a compression of a lifetime of theatre-going, reading and discussion, I cannot hope to enumerate all those to whom I am indebted. In cultural matters we choose our friends and select our ancestors. To them all, living and dead, I am immensely grateful. I must, however, be precise in may gratitude to Dr Stephen Halliwell for help with the sections on the Greek and Roman theatre and to the readers and editors of Heinemann Educational Books for their wisdom, perspicacity and help.

Acc. No. 313

1 | The Athenian City-state

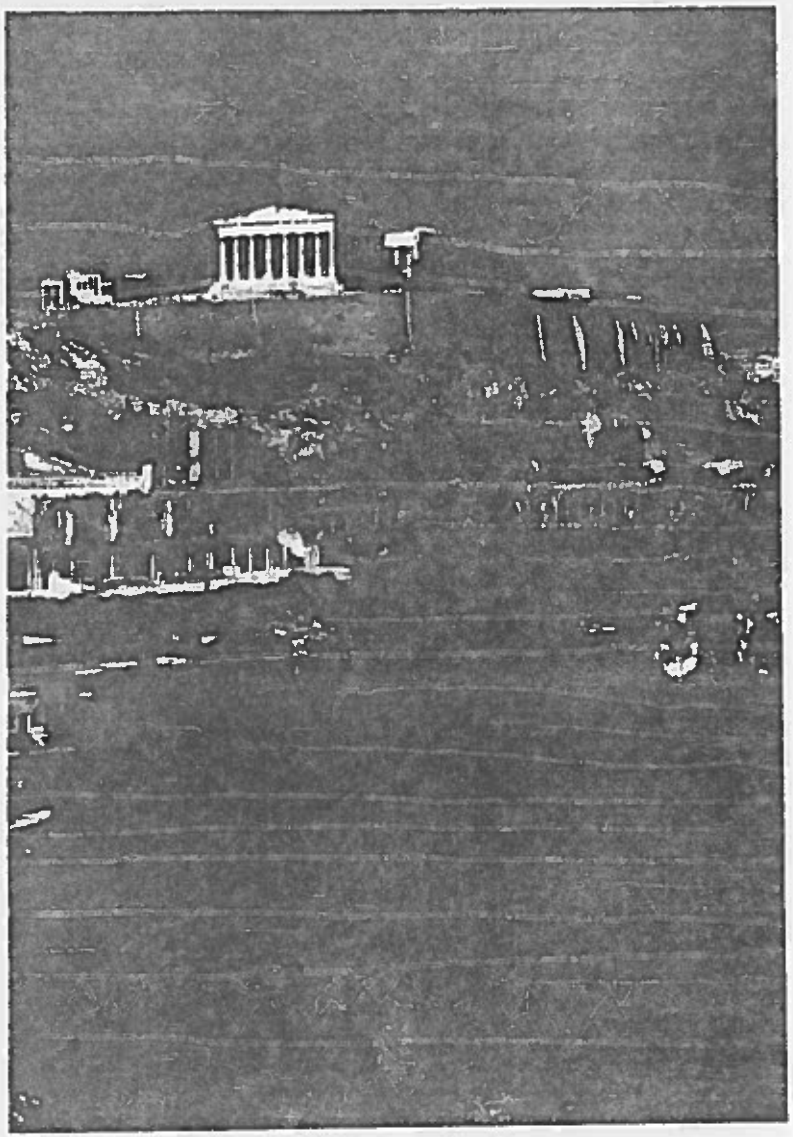
The theatre, *theatron*, the seeing-place, together with drama, were the creation of the Athenians in the fifth century BC. Drama is known to have existed many centuries earlier in such ancient civilizations as China, India, and Egypt but it was almost wholly ritual drama, which is to say that its enactment or performance had a life-giving purpose like the celebration of mass in a Christian church.

By the fifth century BC the city of Athens had reached political maturity. It had grown from a primitive community to the leading city in the Hellenic world in the space of about 500 years. 'We are the inhabitants of a city endowed with every sort of wealth and greatness', the great politician Perikles is reported to have said. Perikles was the last in a succession of politicians such as Solon, Kleisthenes, and Peisistratos who, over the previous two centuries, had been responsible for creating a democratic city-state which the Greeks called a *polis*, the word from which 'politician' is appropriately derived. Athens under Perikles was a city of about 200,000 inhabitants of which some half were slaves and many were foreigners; but there were no great tensions among the various social classes and there was a good deal of what is now called 'participation in government'.

Greece in the fifth century BC was not a country with a strong sense of nationality. Its proper name, then as now, was not Greece but Hellas, Greece being an anglicization of Graecia, the name the Romans gave Greece when in 146 they conquered the country and made it a Roman province. Hellas at this time was a confederation of city-states covering mainland Greece, the Greek islands, and the coast of Asia Minor (now Turkey), which had been colonized by the Greeks and was known as Ionia. The outstanding cultural characteristic of the confederation was the Greek language which, with local variations, was spoken throughout the area of the Aegean sea. By the fifth century Athens had won for herself a commanding political position; but Perikles's vision of a Hellenic Empire led by Athens came to grief through Athenian arrogance and the jealousy of rival city-states such as Korinth, Thebes, and particularly Sparta.

It was in this new and flourishing society that dramatic performances emerged as a major form of cultural expression.

There is a vast number of readable books on classical Greece such as, for example, H. D. F. Kitto's The Greeks*; but none give one so sure a 'feel' or so vivid a picture of the period as the works of the Greeks themselves. The* Histories *of Herodotus and Thoukukides are enthralling and available in excellent English translations.*

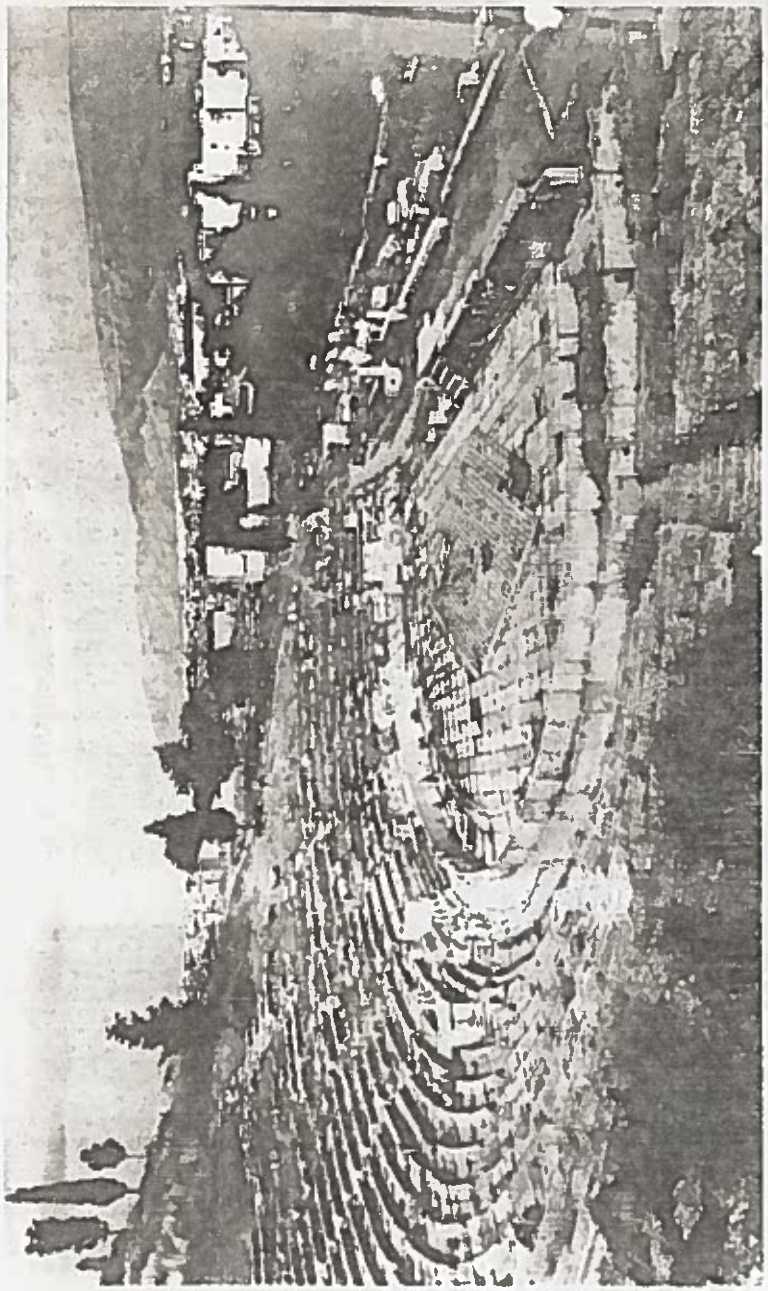


1. The Acropolis, from the west, seen from the hill of Philopappos.

2 | The Theatre of Dionysos

The centre of ancient Athens and the site of the earliest settlement was the Akropolis (*Akro-polis*), an immense rock on which, in the fifth century, the Athenians built a number of temples and administrative buildings of which the most outstandingly beautiful is the Parthenon, even in its present ruined condition still one of the wonders of the world. In the shadow of the south-east corner of this great rock they built the Theatre of Dionysos. Like every subsequent theatre it had three elements. The main (acting) area, and the earliest part of the theatre to be built, was a large circular dancing floor known as the *orchestra* which was mostly, if not wholly, used by the chorus. The second element, the audience, in earliest times sat on the slope that rose from the edge of the orchestra to the great rock wall of the Akropolis but as performances became more organized, improvised seating was replaced by a number of wooden tiers. Thirdly, there is the acting area. There may have been a long low wooden platform, perhaps cutting off a segment of the orchestra, and although this may have been used by the actors there is no evidence of a stage as we know it today. At a certain date, as backing or definition of the acting area, there was a building known as the *skene* which provided an architectural setting for the play, while its interior is thought to have been used as a dressing-room for the actors.

The present stone ruins are the remains of a new theatre that was completed by an administrator called Lykurgos who had control of the city's finances between 338 and 326 BC. There still exists the great tiled orchestra, sixty-six feet in diameter, the remnants of the stone auditorium with its front row consisting of sixty-seven throne seats, incised with the names of Athenian notabilities, and the throne for the priest of Dionysos in the middle. Of the *skene* nothing but the ruins remain. Sitting in the middle of those great stone terraces one can gaze, as Athenian audiences must have done, beyond the *orchestra*, beyond the actors, beyond the *skene*, to Mount Hymettos and the distant Aegean, so dearly loved by the Greeks. It is hard to believe that there can be a more exquisitely situated theatre anywhere in the world, except perhaps in Greece itself, at Delphi.



2. Theatre of Dionysos, Athens
Present remains of the reconstruction of the theatre by Lykurgos around 330 BC. The walls of the Akropolis are behind the auditorium to the left of the picture.

The standard work on the Theatre of Dionysos is A. W. Pickard-Cambridge's The Theatre of Dionysos in Athens. ***But the book requires a knowledge of Greek to be of much use to the lay reader. Although the author has picked over and measured every surviving stone and crevice there are many details of this fine theatre that are the subject of considerable scholarly disputation.***

It is perhaps unnecessary to urge the importance of visiting Athens; but there are other fine theatres, especially at Epidauros, where performances of Greek plays are sometimes given by Greek companies.

3 | Athenian Dramatic Festivals

It is one of the curious but important features of drama that it has constantly emerged out of ritual. This of course tells us as much about ritual as it does about drama. Ritual, which is common to all ancient religions, derives from the belief that the imitation of an action can have a bearing on the action itself. The imitation of rain, or sound of rain, was thought likely to make it rain, for example. Primitive hunting societies believed that certain imitative and mimetic actions, often expressed in the form of dance, would lead to success in the hunt. Agricultural communities believed that the wooing of the Spring Queen by the Corn King was necessary to ensure the success of the spring sowing. In such a ritual as this an element of dramatic impersonation was involved. Further rituals were developed around the death of the tribal leader to ensure a continuity in leadership and that the strength and wisdom of the dead king should be passed on to his successor. Thus the celebrated cry – The king is dead! Long live the king!

It was the agricultural ritual that was most significant for drama, and indeed for society at large, since society depended even more than now on the harvest, and the cycle of sowing and reaping is related to the cycle of the seasons. The great festivals of early societies therefore took place at crucial times in the agricultural calendar, in the spring when the grain was sown, in late summer when the harvest was gathered, and in mid-winter when nature had to be reborn.

So it was in Athenian society. There were a number of festivals throughout autumn, winter, and spring, related to sowing the seed and the making of wine; but by far the most significant was the City or

Great Dionysia which was celebrated at the end of March. It was a public holiday with many kinds of civic functions from the conferring of honours on distinguished citizens to the rewarding of orphan children whose fathers had been killed in battle. Visitors came to Athens from all parts of the Hellenic world and the wealth of the city was put on show. Most remarkable of all is that its central feature was performances of dramatic and lyric poetry in the Theatre of Dionysos.

The explanation of how this came about lies in the word *Dionysia*. Greek religion of the time was in no respect like the Muslim or Christian religions which carefully prescribe the nature of the faith. It was also remarkably primitive in that many people still thought in anthropomorphic terms. This simply means that they tended to see abstract ideas in the form (*morphe*) of mankind (*anthropos*). In personifying the gods they looked on Zeus as the father and identified the other immortals with various human activities. But there was no pervading body of religious belief; there was no priesthood constituting an influential caste or class although there were a great number of priests and prophets who occupied the oracles and the temples.

Thus there existed a considerable variety of religious practices and local cults. One of the most influential of these cults was that of the god Dionysos. The cult first emerged in Thrace and had become widespread long before the fifth century. Of all Greek myths, those which tell the story of Dionysos are among the most savage. One of them recounts how, as a child, the god, the offspring of Zeus and Semele, was torn to pieces by the Titans at the instigation of Zeus's jealous wife. The Titans then threw the limbs into a caldron, boiled and ate them. A more palatable story tells of the marriage of Dionysos with a champion female athlete, the couple becoming identified with various fertility rites such as the wooing of the Corn King and the Spring Queen. (It was such competitive initiation ceremonies that gave rise to the Olympic Games, first established around 776 BC.)

But it was as god of the grape, of wine, of intoxication that Dionysos was chiefly celebrated and it is a curious fact that this rather disreputable immortal should have become the patron of the most important of all Athenian civic festivals. That this occurred was the achievement of the tyrant Peisistratos, an unconstitutional demagogue who ruled Athens for various periods during the sixth century. Although he did not advance the cause of democracy as a political principle, he made it a feature of his policy in championing the middle class, which was growing in size and power, and curbing the authority of the aristocracy. He confiscated land and gave it to the peasants, improved the coinage, developed export trade, and established a programme of public works that helped to make Athens a major city. He backed up these practical reforms with a vigorous cultural programme by founding or at least reorganizing one of the city's major festivals, the City Dionysia, and instituting competitive public recitals by Ionian minstrels of the Homeric poems which he had had edited for the first time.

The Greek tyrants were men, usually of aristocratic birth who, mostly in the seventh and sixth centuries, seized control of the polis *and established their own policy. They were responsible for great economic changes, often for the better, and were not usually 'baddies' as subsequently depicted.*

4 | The City Dionysia

The festival lasted for five or six days. It was a triumphant affair when slaves were freed, debtors exonerated, visitors welcomed, and the world went on holiday. The first day was devoted to the celebration of the god. His image was carried in triumphal procession from the temple in which it was habitually housed in the village of Eleutherai, an original centre of the cult, to the theatre where choruses were sung and a bull was sacrificed. At the end of the festival the image was ceremoniously returned.

The second day of the festival consisted of a competition in the singing and performance of dithyrambs by each of the ten tribes into which the citizens of Athens had been organized by one of the creators of Athenian democracy, Kleisthenes. There was a panel of judges elected by the Athenian Assembly and the winning tribe was awarded a bull as a prize.

The reason for the constant intrusion of the bull into the rituals of Dionysos is complex. A bull was held to be one of the common incarnations of the god. Worshippers who devoured the flesh of the bull believed that they were eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the god and so partaking of his strength and divine power. This concept of incarnation lies at the heart of many religions including Christianity; but it also provides one of the assumptions on which drama is based, that some dead or imaginary person can be incarnated or reincarnated,

whether a dead king or a fertility spirit, in the person of the actor. This rather mysterious belief begins to explain why actors have frequently been treated by society as suspect and unreliable individuals. Someone who spends his life reincarnating other individuals cannot be as ordinary people are. But the crucial element is the attitude of the audience (or congregation or participants in the ritual). While some Christian worshippers believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation, that the bread and the wine actually turn into the body and the blood of Christ, to others it is a symbolic act, and none the less efficacious for that. Most theatre audiences agree implicitly to take part in a game of 'let's pretend'; but there are moments when the emotion runs so deep and the reality of the acting is so impressive that one is tempted to believe that the actors have actually lived their roles.

As for the relationship between the bull and Dionysos, this seems to have been the coincidence of two ideas. Since there is not a more noble animal than the bull, especially among domestic beasts, it is understandable that people who were accustomed to view the world in anthropomorphic terms should have seen the bull as the incarnation of fertility, the very quality they had associated with the god Dionysos. In fact the matter goes farther than that, for ancient societies have frequently tended to attach some special qualities to the horned beast. That is probably the explanation of how the goat comes into the story, for bulls are relatively rare and valuable creatures, whereas in Greece goats are prevalent, and being a great deal cheaper, provided an acceptable substitute.

On the third, fourth, and fifth days of the festival there was a competition in dramatic performances. A member of the Athenian Council, known as the *archon* was given the responsibility of choosing the best three groups of plays submitted by Athenian citizens. He then chose a *choregos*, a wealthy citizen who was responsible for bearing the cost of the production, a privilege that was known as a *leiturgia*, or public service, from which our word liturgy is derived, as well as a *didaskalos* for training the chorus and engaging a flute-player to accompany the singing. The prize was a goat in default of a bull. The word *tragoedia* (tragedy) seems to have meant 'goat song' and to have had nothing to do with subsequent meanings of the word.

There were five judges and the victorious poet, whose name was proclaimed by a herald, was crowned in the theatre by the *archon* with a wreath of ivy.

The group of plays, which each competing dramatist had to submit, consisted of three tragedies, not necessarily related in theme or story, and a satyr play. These four plays were known as tetralogies. What the Greeks seem to have understood by a tragedy will be discussed in the chapter on Aristotle. As to satyr plays not even Aristotle provides an adequate definition and since of this genre only a single play by Euripides and a few fragments survive, one cannot say more than that they seem to have been concerned with the debunking of the hero, and that the chorus consisted of satyrs, creatures that were half-human, half-animal, and of an ancestry of which we know nothing. The satyr play had nothing to do with Greek comedy, although it was presumably amusing, nor with what has subsequently become known as satire.

5 | The Creation of Dramatic Form

How did all this come about?

If this is the most vexatious subject of all it is because it is the most relevant to the subject of this book. Our only near-contemporary authority is Aristotle and he was writing nearly a hundred years after the events he is describing. Aristotle proposes a clear link between tragedy and the dithyramb. The dithyramb was a kind of choral dance that was first associated with the worship of Dionysos. The first person known to have composed dithyrambs was the Korinthian poet Arion who was also associated with another religious dance that was performed by satyrs, men crowned with flowers and ivy. Dithyrambs were danced by a chorus of usually fifty men and boys. Although few texts of dithyrambs exist, it is known that they dealt with aspects of the life and death of the god Dionysos. The man who saw the dramatic possibilities of the dithyramb was an actor-poet called Thespis who came to Athens at the time the City Dionysia was being reorganized and extended. He seems to have entered into some kind of artistic collaboration with the performers of the dithyrambs by delivering a prologue and breaking up the choral dance with some set speeches. This perhaps helped to give coherence and unity to performances which had originally been wild and unrestrained, as one would expect of ceremonies associated with wine. Aristotle says that Thespis 'entered into conversation with the leader of the chorus' which is the kind of form we find in the tragedies of Aeschylus. Thespis won first prize in the first tragic contest which took place in the year 534 BC.

As the dithyrambic chorus turned into a tragic chorus it became increasingly dramatic without ever wholly losing its choral nature. It broke into two parts and sang antiphonally while the leader became almost another actor. With the creation of a second actor tragedy assumed its independent form.

There was, however, another strand which in some way or other must have become related to the experiments that Thespis was conducting with the dithyramb. In 560 BC Peisistratos made himself tyrant of Athens. He was one of those men, of whom there were to be many more in the course of European history, who used art and culture for political ends, although there is no reason to believe that such people do not at the same time appreciate art for its own sake. One of the great achievements of Peisistratos was to arrange for the Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to be edited and presumably written down. This was necessary since, in the absence of printed texts, people could not read the poems for themselves but were accustomed to them being recited by *rhapsodes*, each of whom would have his own version. Peisistratos employed his scholars to establish a standardized version, and then arranged for there to be a competition among *rhapsodes* as a part of the great Athenian summer festival, the Panathenaea. Since this competition was established around 550, only a few years before Thespis comes into the picture, it is reasonable to assume that there was some kind of connection between the two developments. Moreover we know from what Plato and Aristotle wrote that the *rhapsodes* recited Homer in a highly theatrical manner. It was indeed from their number that the earliest actors may have been recruited.

Aeschylus doubtless played a part in these developments, but although he was the first dramatist to have written any plays which have survived, he was not the first tragic dramatist. There was Phrynikos whose name is coupled with Thespis as a creator of tragedy; Choerilos who won thirteen victories and competed against Aeschylus in the latter's younger days; and Pratinas who is thought to have introduced the satyr play.

These were the men who created the art of the theatre and of drama. It was a period of prodigious inventiveness in almost every aspect of Athenian life. The historian Thoukikides puts a vivid estimation of the Athenian character into the mouth of a Korinthian envoy – 'An Athenian is always an innovator, quick to form a resolution and quick at carrying it out . . . He is daring, resourceful, tireless.' So it was with the poets. Judging by the rapidity with which their achievement was given pride of place in Athenian public life it seems to have represented an act of will by the whole community. There has probably never been another period when drama was so close to the community that supported it.

In the early years of the century a group of Cambridge scholars, Gilbert Murray, Jane Harrison, Frances Cornford, and others, stimulated by Sir James Frazer's great work of anthropology, The Golden Bough, *produced some books on what they considered to be the origins of Greek tragedy. Scholarship is now more sober-sided and more recent books such as Sir A. W. Pickard-Cambridge's* Dithyramb, Tragedy, Comedy *and Gerard Else's* The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy *emphasize the profound uncertainties about almost every aspect of Greek theatre and its drama. Nevertheless reasonable reliance can be placed on such books as H. C. Baldry's* The Greek Tragic Theatre *and J. Michael Walton's* Greek Theatre Practice.

6 | Aeschylus

Aeschylus lived from 525 until 456 BC. He came of an aristocratic family and was probably brought up as some kind of a priest. He made his début as a dramatist at the City Dionysia in the year 500 but he did not win first prize until fifteen years later. (It is a calamity that we have nothing by any of his competitors.) He is thought to have composed between eighty and ninety plays of which seven have survived. This amounts to about twenty tetralogies.

Persai (*The Persians*) is the only example of a play by one of the three great tragic dramatists on a contemporary theme. *Hiketides* (*Suppliants*) is a fine example of a play in which the chorus is protagonist. *Epta epi Thebas* (*Seven against Thebes*) is a splendid and deeply tragic play taken from the ancient history of Thebes and dealing largely with the unhappy life and descendants of Oedipus. *Prometheus Desmotes* (*Prometheus Bound*), the authorship of which is now in serious question, is a play of tremendous poetic and imaginative power dealing with the relationship of god to man in mythical terms that constitute a fascinating parallel to the myth that is described in the first chapter of Genesis. Though in some respects an even more powerful work than the *Oresteia* it is less well known since its philosophical attitudes are no longer of immediate relevance and it is virtually unstageable in any way that would do justice to its towering imaginative concepts.

The *Oresteia* (the story of Orestes), staged in 458 BC, is the only surviving example of a trilogy. The three plays are *Agamemnon*, which deals with the return of the king from the Trojan war and his murder by

Clytemnestra; *Choephoroi* (usually translated into English as *The Libation-bearers*) dealing with the return of Orestes, his meeting with his sister Elektra, and the murder of their mother and her lover Aegisthus; and *Eumenides* which is usually left at that, though a recent scholar has translated it as *The Gracious Goddesses*. This play deals with the trial of Orestes and the final establishment of Athenian justice.

Though Aeschylus was undoubtedly an innovator of genius it is impossible to tell the extent of his contribution to the development of tragedy for we know nothing about the work of his contemporaries. It is clear, however, that he was a supremely gifted poet, an art in which the Greeks had been pre-eminent since the time of Homer. Homer, and others whose names have been lost, was an epic poet. There was a vigorous tradition of lyric poetry, one of the most notable features of which was the variety of metres the poets used. Aeschylus and his colleagues were known not as dramatists but as dramatic poets. One of their finest achievements was to have adapted the richness of the Greek language and the metrical vitality of its poetry to dramatic purposes. The Greek language has the advantage in this respect of vowel sounds which are measured, rather like in French, as opposed to being stressed, as in English and German. This measured quality of the language is marked by lengthening rather than emphasizing the vowels and this is best done musically; and since there was virtually no distinction between words and music the Greek dramatists wrote their great metrical texts and the way they should be sung as a single operation in which the choreography was also an essential part. They called a metrical unit a foot (*pous*) because this is what it represented, a step. Metre comes from the word *metros* meaning measure.

Another aspect of tragedy which Aeschylus and his colleagues developed was its subject-matter, and this was taken very largely from myth. This is a subject about which so much confusion exists that a little unravelling is essential.

Critical works on Aeschylus abound. Of unusual interest is George Thomson's study of the relationship between his plays and contemporary Greek society, Aeschylus and Athens.

7 | Greek Myth

Myth must be distinguished from fairy-tale and legend although each may include elements of the other. Fairy-tales are for the most part a product of the fancy though there may be legendary or mythical elements that have fired the imagination of the story-teller. Legends are traditional stories that may have had a mythological origin but which do not go beyond the events the legend is recounting. Myth is more profound and far-reaching. It derives from ages when men were unable to make a distinction between cause and effect; before the art of writing history had demonstrated that men could see the difference between fact and fiction; before man had acquired the faculty for scientific analysis. Although there are no clear distinctions between myth and legend, the one frequently overlapping the other, myth is usually the explanation of a great variety of communal beliefs and experiences. The difficulty lies in interpreting them. The story of the Garden of Eden is clearly the attempt of early Hebrew scribes to lay down certain profound moral principles. Whether such a place as the Garden of Eden ever existed is beside the point: the truth of the creation myth, as expounded in the first chapter of Genesis, has been so widely accepted that it has survived until the present day. The Greek creation myth, which has not survived because it was more local and carried less of a universal truth, begins with the sky god Uranos who was the husband of the earth goddess. Their children were Titans and included the unattractive character of Kronos who castrated his own father. Another of their children was Zeus who made war on Kronos and the Titans and defeated them with his thunderbolts. Zeus, however, was one of the twelve gods associated with Mount Olympus. His recognition by the Greeks represents an advance in religious thought. All this may be interpreted as the way in which the Greeks recorded an invasion of fine-looking men and women from the north (the Olympian gods and goddesses) who overran an earlier and more primitive society.

The story continues in a most interesting manner. One of the more promiscuous of Zeus's many children was Tantalos who was sentenced to everlasting punishment (to be tantalized) for serving up the flesh of one of his sons in a banquet he was giving to the gods to determine whether they could detect human flesh from that of animals. (The

emergence of a meat-eating society.) The son in question, Pelops, was restored to life but not surprisingly turned out to be a bad lot. For carrying out a particularly vicious murder, in order to secure the woman he wished to marry, he was put under a curse which took particular effect upon his two sons, Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus, King of Mykene (the myth is now moving into historical times) banished his brother for having seduced his wife but eventually recalled him and offered him a banquet which included a pie made of flesh of his own children. Thyestes fled in horror and in due course married a woman who bore him a son, Aegisthus, whom she exposed (left in the open to die) but who was discovered and brought up by a shepherd, and adopted by Atreus who was not aware of his real identity. As a young man he seduced the wife of the King of Mykene who was absent on military service fighting the Trojans. This King was Agamemnon and his brother was Menelaus who had become King of Sparta in succession to Tyndareus. This unfortunate man had a wife named Leda who was seduced by Zeus in the form of a swan and gave birth to Helen and Clytemnestra. Helen became the wife of Menelaus and Clytemnestra of Agamemnon. At this point Priam, King of Troy, sent an attractive young fellow called Paris on an ambassadorial mission to Sparta. It was a bad mistake and Menelaus made it worse by taking himself off to Crete on business leaving the attractive Paris with his wife Helen, who was reputed to have been the most beautiful woman in the world. By the time he had returned from Crete, Paris and Helen were safely in Troy. Menelaus, outraged, persuaded his brother, Agamemnon, to lead an expedition against Troy to regain Helen. At the outset of the expedition, the fleet was becalmed due to jealous rivalry among the Olympian goddesses. Calchas, the high-priest of the expedition, persuaded Agamemnon that the only hope of raising a wind was by the sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. When Queen Clytemnestra back home heard of the sacrifice she swore to take vengeance on her husband and accepted Aegisthus as her lover. It took the Greek army nine years to conquer Troy, a period of time which itself has mythological significance. It is with the return of King Agamemnon to the Palace of Mykene that Aeschylus's great trilogy begins.

How great an element of historical truth lies behind this farrago of murder, revenge, cannibalism, treachery, seduction, and sheer bloody-mindedness? The probability, of course, is that the nearer we come to historical times, the stronger the factual and historical element is likely to be; and so it has proved. In the 1870s and 1880s a wealthy German archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, acting on an almost incredible flash of intuition, backed by some sound scholarship, organized archaeological 'digs', first on the site where he reckoned that Troy must

have been situated, and then at Mykene and Tiryns. In each of these places he not only unearthed treasures of great beauty and skill in workmanship but found them to be precisely consistent with descriptions in Homer's epic, the *Iliad*. So Troy was real. The Trojan war took place. Agamemnon had been King of Mykene. Myth was shown to have had a basis in historical truth.

When the young Aeschylus took up play-writing around the year 500 BC there was an immense body of myth on which he could draw for stories. The Homeric and other epics, long since lost, had only recently been edited and so were readily available. There was a confusion of quasi-religious beliefs, practices, and superstitions which left the field clear for all kinds of speculation, and there was a vigorous tradition of lyric poetry.

Tragedy, therefore, constituted a further projection of and enquiry into the Greek view of life. One can detect these two elements in the plays of the tragic dramatists. On the one hand they embody traditional attitudes as enshrined in the myths; but at the same time they subject these myths to commentary and criticism. This critical element is explicit in the plays of Euripides, who was what we might now call an agnostic, and implicit in the plays of Aeschylus who does not directly criticize the ways of the gods but wrestles with the kinds of attitudes they seem to represent. What evidently interested him in *The Suppliants* was the existence of laws that imposed forced marriages on unwilling women. In *The Persians* he contrasts Persian arrogance with Athenian democratic ideals. 'A free people are not easily defeated', says one of the characters. *Prometheus Bound* contrasts, in the form of a violent and intensely dramatic debate, the old illiberal, aggressive, and irrational practices of Zeus, who had caused Prometheus to be chained to a rock in the Caucasus for having stolen fire from the gods and for giving it to man, with the innovatory hero who has helped man to acquire many of his most civilized skills and crafts.

But it is in the *Oresteia* that he reveals his hand most clearly. In the first two plays he shows how the blood feud which stretches back into the primitive origins of Greek society shows no signs of abating until new forms of justice are established. In one of the opening choruses in which the Mykenean elders rehearse the whole story of the curse, he dismisses the violent tyranny of the old god Uranos and then he seems to celebrate the unifying power of Zeus whom he sees no longer as the high-born seducer of the earlier myths but as a kind of Hebraic deity.

> Zeus is the name to cry in your triumph song
> and win the prize for wisdom.

In the third play Orestes is brought to trial by the avenging furies,

the *Erinyes*, for the appalling crime of mother-murder. The goddess Athene listens to their case and then refers it to the Areopagus, the supreme Athenian court of justice which was accustomed to meet on the rock in the shadow of which, in the Theatre of Dionysos, the performance was taking place. Orestes is acquitted by the casting vote of Athene, the patron goddess of Athens. The Furies are incensed at having been outvoted by a younger goddess; but as they begin to understand the wisdom of the decision, they are transformed into the Eumenides, the good-natured ones. In this extraordinary play Aeschylus challenges the ancient myth and puts the gods themselves on trial. It is Athenian justice which must break the savage myth and Athenian justice which will bring peace and prosperity to mankind.

Another view of the myth, however, is quoted by the historian Herodotos who was in his teens when the *Oresteia* was first staged:

> It was the Greeks who were in the military sense the aggressors [he writes, referring to the Trojan war]. Abducting young women, in their opinion, is not, indeed, a lawful act; but it is stupid after the event to make a fuss about it. The only sensible thing is to take no notice; for it is obvious that no young woman allows herself to be abducted if she does not wish to be.

Greek myth is a subject of considerable academic controversy, understandably so, since myth by its very nature is imprecise and susceptible to individual interpretation. What myths are not are fairy-stories. A straightforward exposition of what the Greeks themselves wrote about their myths is to be found in H. J. Rose's A Handbook of Greek Mythology. *For extremes in the interpretation of myth one can turn to Robert Graves, Carl Jung, and many others. A sensible study of the whole subject is G. S. Kirk's* The Nature of Greek Myths. *But the whole nature of myth is now being reconsidered by anthropologists and even linguists on the grounds that myth is an early expression of thought processes and language.*

The importance of reading the works of the Greeks themselves has already been emphasized. Nothing shows the primitive savagery of the early myths more clearly than Hesiod's Theogeny *which traces the (mythical) history of the world from primeval chaos to the ascendancy of Zeus.*

For a background to other aspects of this section two works are indispensable, besides being finely written: Five Stages of Greek Religion *and* The Rise of the Greek Epic, *both by that fine scholar and poet, Gilbert Murray.*

8 | Sophokles

Sophokles (496–406) was thirty years younger than Aeschylus but old enough to have seen many of the old master's plays and to have competed against him. He wrote 123 plays which amount to thirty tetralogies, but these did not include any connected trilogies. That he won twenty-four victories testifies to his mastery as a dramatist and his popularity with audiences. This professional success is consistent with his public life. In spite of this prodigious output of drama he played a vigorous part in the life of Athens, accepted public office of various kinds, and enjoyed the friendship of Perikles who acted occasionally as his *choregos*. All references to Sophokles suggest that he was an exceptionally attractive and well-graced man, a loved and respected citizen of the *polis*.

This combination of personal distinction and professional brilliance is supported by the impression of the man we have from his seven surviving plays. In contrast with the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides they are the work of a conservative. He was not a thunderer like Aeschylus, wrestling with the imponderables of human existence, nor a complex and seemingly embittered personality like Euripides. He took the myths that were the subject of his plays at their face value, drawing from them every possible implication for what they have to say of the human condition, but neither challenging their assumptions nor attempting to reorder the values they express.

It so happens that all three dramatists handled the Elektra story. Sophokles's version is reasonably straightforward. He spends no time bewailing the horror of the primitive myth or warning his audiences against the outmoded tyranny of Uranos as Aeschylus does; nor does he turn Elektra into a vengeful and neurotic harridan as Euripides does. He dramatizes the events of the myth in full acceptance of the horror of the story, writing in superb poetry and showing a masterly sense of dramatic construction.

Most of his surviving plays come from the latter part of his life when Athens was conducting an ultimately disastrous war with Sparta. These lamentable events, which produced the most violent resentment in Euripides, do not seem to have affected him deeply as an artist but to have underlined that curious pessimism that runs throughout the work

of these three dramatists and that can be summed up in the phrase, 'no man is happy until he is dead'. Three of his less popular plays seem to make that very point. In *Ajax* (?), *Trachiniae* (*The Women of Trachis*, *c.*430) and *Philoktetes* (409) he does not accuse the gods of being responsible for human suffering, but he does suggest that the best of us are victims of circumstances within which there is no opportunity for the operation of free will.

Three of his finest plays deal with aspects of the story of Oedipus, King of Thebes. *Antigone* (441), which takes up the story at the point that Aeschylus left it in *Seven against Thebes*, has become accepted as the classic statement of the rights of the individual against the state, though Sophokles was probably far more concerned with the religious aspects of the situation. *Oidipous turannos* (*Oedipus the Tyrant*, *c.*430) is the play that was singled out by Aristotle as the finest example of Greek tragedy. It tells the horrifying story of how Oedipus discovers that he has killed his father and married his mother. Twentieth-century psychiatry has taken the story as an archetypal statement of a basic human experience, an extreme case of a quality that is to be found in many other myths and which accounts for the surviving popularity of Greek tragedy.

In none of these plays, not even in those he wrote when Athens was facing total military defeat, does Sophokles allow himself a critical or querulous note. *Oidipous epi Kolonoi* (*Oedipus at Kolonos*) which he probably wrote in his ninetieth year and which was posthumously produced in 401, may be interpreted as having political references in scenes when the old King denounces Theban treachery, just as citizens of Athens may have done when the play was first produced.

Sophokles made important contributions to the development of theatrical technique. He is credited with having introduced painted scenery, however this was done, with increasing the size of the chorus from twelve to fifteen, and with introducing a third actor, so greatly extending the number of characters a dramatist could use.

It was with reference to Sophokles that the poet Matthew Arnold wrote his famous line, 'He saw life steadily and saw it whole.'

9 | Euripides

Although Euripides (484–406/7) was only twelve years younger than Sophokles he writes in so distinctive a style as to appear to be of another generation. This was probably the result of a unique artistic temperament which produced a wholly different and far more personal response to the brutalities and disasters of the Peloponnesian war. But whereas Sophokles played a prominent part in the political life of Athens, Euripides was a lonely figure, an extreme individualist of whose self-imposed isolation and morose nature there were many, though not very well-authenticated, stories. Although he was far less popular during his lifetime than Sophokles, winning only five victories from ninety-two plays, or twenty-three tetralogies, his work aroused considerable interest. There is a good deal of evidence, in addition to the fact that nineteen of his plays have survived, to suggest that subsequent generations found him the most approachable of the three dramatists. This is understandable. His attitude to human nature is more realistic. He does not inveigh against the gods but rather treats them with a certain contempt, presenting them on the stage with the human fallibilities of ordinary mortals. The lovely play *Alkestis* begins with Apollo explaining that as an act of petty vengeance his father Zeus has reduced him to the status of a mortal and this has involved him in playing a deceitful trick to save the life of Admetus. The superb play *Hippolytos* opens with an admission by the goddess Aphrodite that as a result of Hippolytos having no use for female company and spending most of his time hunting as a votary of the goddess Artemis, she has organized a plot that involves his stepmother Phaedra falling deeply in love with him. But having disposed of divine intervention in setting up the situation, Euripides seems to suggest that the rest is a matter of mortal cause and effect, and allows his interest in human psychology to come into play.

Similarly with his protagonists: they are not of heroic stature, projections of some great moral principal, but human in their submission to suffering even when he depicts such anguish, as he does in *Troades* (*Women of Troy*) in the most profoundly emotional terms. His heroes and heroines behave as free and responsible people; when they act improperly they take the consequences and do not blame the gods.

10 | Greek Tragedy in Performance

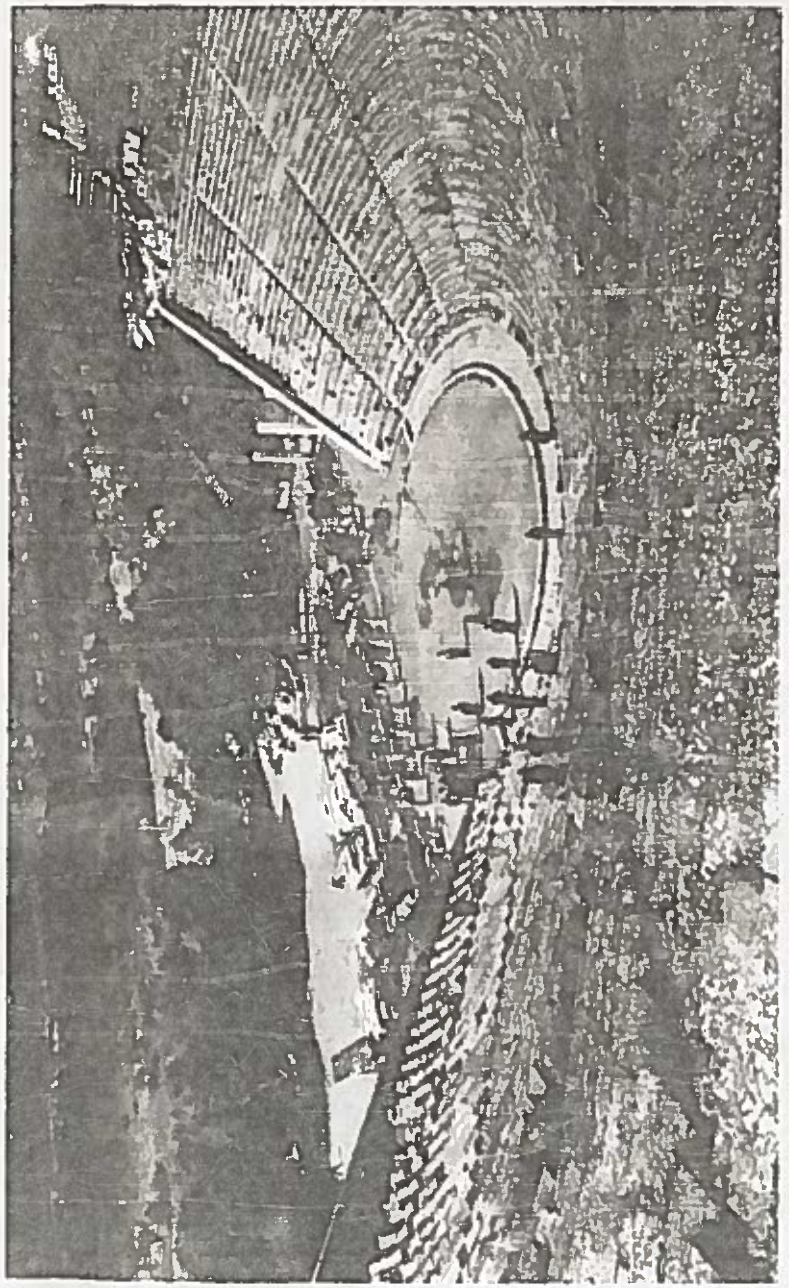
A little imagination can get us some way towards envisaging the performance of a Greek tragedy in the Theatre of Dionysos. In the bright spring air an audience of many thousands occupies the curved and sloping auditorium beneath the great rock of the Akropolis. On the circular dancing floor, the *orchestra*, there is the chorus of twelve and then fifteen figures, sometimes speaking, sometimes declaiming, and singing and dancing the choral odes. Behind them are the actors, never more than three, on whatever kind of a stage there may have been.

It is the chorus that probably constitutes the biggest difference between a theatrical performance then and now; for in the plays of Aeschylus the chorus is an essential part of the action. Euripides uses the chorus, though in a less dramatically integrated manner, to give additional depth to the action by suggesting a wealth of poetic and imaginative associations. It is clearly no accident that Euripides writes some of his most exquisite poetry for the chorus of his plays. And in *Women of Troy* the chorus plays as important a role as Hecuba herself.

The three actors wore masks. By changing them they could play a variety of roles. Even so the number of characters a dramatist could introduce was strictly limited; but critics have pointed out the irony that could be derived from the 'doubling' of roles. Thus in *The Libation-bearers* of Aeschylus the chief actor (*protagonist*), undoubtedly played the leading role, that of Orestes; the third actor (*tritagonist*) played the servant, the nurse, Aegisthos, and Pylades, but the second actor (*deuter-agonist*) played both Clytemnestra, the mother, and her daughter Elektra.

Little is known about the masks that were worn in the fifth century. They were probably made of linen and fitted the actor's face closely. The great tragic masks with their high headpieces, together with the thick-soled boots (*kothornoi*) that are usually associated with the performance of Greek tragedy, were the creation of the fourth century or even later. But from the earliest times the actors are said to have worn splendid costumes.

The wearing of masks is one of the many indications of the ritual origins of Greek tragedy. It was a deliberately dehumanizing act. For the mask was a part of the process of incarnation that took place when



3. Theatre of Epidauros, Greece
The best preserved of all Greek theatres, still occasionally used for performances. This immense auditorium, built in the fourth century BC has superb acoustics and held 16,000 spectators.

the priest incarnated, or assumed, or acted the role of a god. A part of the secularization of a religious ritual, when the dramatic element began to replace the religious, was the replacement of priests by actors.

Of styles of acting little is known. Athenian audiences are known to have attached great importance to the actor's voice, both to tone and clarity of diction. The remarkable acoustics which we know the theatre of Epidauros to have possessed must have helped in this respect. As to movement, there is every indication that plays of the classic period had nothing statuesque about them but demanded considerable mobility and ease of movement from the actors. The dramatists directed and acted in their own plays and were known to be excellent dancers. The dramatists chose their actors, Aeschylus often working with Kleandros and Mynniskos, Sophokles with Tlepolemos.

With scenery we are on difficult ground. Aristotle says that Sophokles introduced painted scenery (*skenographia*) but one is not very convinced by the suggestion, for which there is a good deal of evidence, that painted screens were set up in front of the *skene*. There is much talk about the use of *periaktoi*, painted triangular prisms at each side of the stage, a crane (*mechane*) for raising and lowering the immortals from the top of the *skene*, and a *ekkyklema* or wheeled rostrum for rolling out the murdered bodies; but there is not much evidence of their use in classical times, and it is safer to concentrate on the vivid, colourful al fresco nature of the performance with its choreographic chorus and vigorous acting.

11 | Aristotle and Greek Tragedy

The only Greek to have produced a theory of tragedy was Aristotle. The work in question is called *Peri poetikes* (*About Poetry*) usually referred to as *The Poetics*. As Aristotle was not born until 384 he is unlikely to have written this particular book until at least seventy years after the death of Euripides. He seems to have written it as a rejoinder to the disparaging remarks made about tragedy by his master, Plato, in a book of seminal importance, *The Republic*. Plato was an extremely complicated personality, both poet and philosopher, as well as a kind of

amanuensis or reporter of the sayings of the great dialectician, Sokrates. Plato-Sokrates advocated what might be described as a communistic structure of society. This rather restricted political outlook may have been the result of the two philosophers having lived through the final years of the Peloponnesian war. But since they must have been familiar with productions of some of the greatest plays of Sophokles and Euripides it is perhaps surprising that when they come to deal with the position of poetry and music in their ideal commonwealth, they banish the artists into exile.

By the time of Aristotle tragedies of distinction were no longer being written and by Aristotle's own admission in another of his works 'actors held greater power than playwrights'. But revivals were frequent and there is no reason why he should not have been familiar with the works of the three great masters in performance. Curiously he does not deal with the whole group of plays but singles out *Oedipus the Tyrant* (or *King Oedipus* as it is sometimes called) for special consideration. His book is of the utmost importance for two reasons: firstly because he provides a substantial definition of drama which is as valid today as ever it was, though none the less open to challenge; and secondly because it provides the theory on which most play-writing has been based from about the year 500 almost to the present day.

Aristotle agrees with Plato that drama, like music, is an imitation of life. It would all be much easier if we knew exactly what Aristotle meant by *mimesis*. That he describes music as being the most mimetic of the arts means that he does not mean what we mean by imitation. So we are tempted to assume that he meant something like the transformation or recreation of real life into poetic terms. (Not artistic terms, for the Greeks had a word for craft but not for art. Moreover the theme of the book is not drama but poetry and the differences between the three kinds of poetry – epic, lyric, and dramatic.) To Plato's accusation that dramatists have laid stress on the sensational aspects of life, when their social responsibility requires them to project a more idealized view, he replies (in chapter six) that the purpose of tragedy is not social but psychological. He does not use that particular word but it is what he implies. For tragedy, he says, is the reproduction of something done in action not narration (which is the field of epic poetry); that it is complete within its own terms and of a certain significance; and that by arousing pity and fear – and this is the rub and the psychological part – it affects a certain cleansing (*katharsis*) of the emotions. Ink galore has been spent in discussing exactly what he meant by *katharsis*; but the suggestion that we feel better as a result of having seen other people in trouble does begin to explain the problem that was posed in the introduction – why do we include tragedy in our concept of entertain-

ment? Nevertheless it seems to be the case that the pleasure we take from the presentation in dramatic form of sensational or horrifying events at every level from the highest poetic reaches of Shakespeare and Racine to the most crude and rumbustious forms of Victorian melodrama supports the contention that drama is at its most prophylactic (healing? cleansing?) when it is projecting the fears and terrors, as well as the joys and rejoicings, of ordinary people. This is not to say that poetic tragedy and crude melodrama are on the same artistic or social level, for any art which expresses crude emotion is a debasement of human sensibility, just as the finest art is its ennoblement and extension; but it does begin to explain why we take such delight in other people's misfortunes.

Tragedy, says Aristotle, is the imitation of an action; its most important element is therefore its plot for which he uses the word *muthos* (myth); next in importance are *ethos* (character) and thought, for these are the motivations of action; then *lexis* (diction), *opsis* (spectacle), and *melopoiia* (song).

Now although Aristotle presents this as a definition of tragedy, it constitutes an admirable definition of drama in general. What then must be emphasized is that at least until the time of Aristotle the Greeks were not conscious of having created a new artistic form called drama, but only of a new form of poetry called tragedy. The fact that drama had a tragic quality in the modern meaning of the word was the accidental result of the nature of the myths on which drama was based, although it rapidly began to acquire that meaning. For as we have seen, the myths were basically concerned with the facts of life as they appeared to a primitive people – birth, resurrection, and death, and how these everlasting imponderables worked out in terms of the most important people in their society, their kings, rulers, leaders, tyrants, and heroes.

Nevertheless Aristotle does discuss the tragic element of tragedy, though he could hardly have done less once he had decided to take that most tragic of all tragedies, *Oedipus*, as his example: the human weaknesses that lead to personal disaster resulting from some kind of inadequacy in the hero (*hamartia*), and how this may be the result of overweening pride (*hubris*) and lead to a reversal of fortune, the disaster that suddenly attends a man who up until then had been happy and prosperous (*peripeteia*), and the tragic ending (*pathos*).

It is impossible to overrate the importance of Aristotle for an understanding of later developments in European drama. Let it be emphasized that About Poetry *is never dull, at any rate in those early chapters that deal specifically with drama. It is short and pithy. There are many translations and countless commentaries.*

Plato is another matter. He is for the enquiring mind. But he is the first to voice a scepticism about drama which has been constantly repeated. His accusation that the arts in general and drama in particular reproduce the superficial appearance of things rather than their basic nature or form is a challenge that has constantly to be answered afresh. Aristotle's reply was what we have called 'psychological'. Our answer today would be based on social considerations. Why? and with what validity?

12 | The Origins of Comedy

Aristotle, in chapter five of his book on poetry, says that the successive stages through which tragedy passed are well known, whereas comedy has had no history because at first it was not taken seriously. There is undoubtedly a great deal of truth in this remark. Comedy is notoriously difficult to categorize, analyse, or even to record, since laughter defies definition and the capacity to make people laugh, though exploited by the professional comedian, is something that many people are capable of doing under almost any circumstances.

There are other reasons why comedy tends not to be taken seriously. For one thing it is 'anti-establishment', it is critical of authority, it makes jokes at the expense of over-seriousness. There is nothing more satisfying than to see the overweening general slip on a banana skin or the pedantic professor fall over his own words. Comedy is indeed to do with slipping and falling, losing face, dignity, and respect. It tends to shock. And it is constantly rude.

There is really no evidence that comedy had a similar origin to tragedy in some kind of quasi-religious ritual, but that it was in its origins closely associated with the whole concept of fertility is clear. Early comedy seems always to have been associated with phallic songs and dances. The phallus, the distinctive male organ, was adopted by many primitive people as a symbol of fertility. Worshippers in their ceremonies attached a false and greatly enlarged phallus to the appropriate part of their person, and this was particularly common practice in the worship of Dionysos. Some scholars, using ancient masks, terracotta statuettes, and vase paintings as evidence, have suggested that from away back in the sixth century, the more serious fertility rituals

were accompanied, though at another time and place no doubt, by knock-about farces in which mythological and legendary themes were 'sent up' with Herakles as a favourite buffoon.

So comedy took longer than tragedy to be established as a serious dramatic form; the competitive element for writers of comedy was not established until 486 and at the festival of the Lenaia, a less important occasion than the City Dionysia in about 440.

13 | Aristophanes

Of the earliest writers of comedy, Chionides and Magnes, only their names are known. They were followed by Kratinos, of whose output twenty-seven titles have survived but whose early brilliance was dimmed by enthusiasm for alcohol; and there was Eupolis, a near-contemporary of Aristophanes, who won seven first prizes.

Aristophanes (*c.*448–*c.*380) is the only writer of comedies from whom any plays have survived – eleven titles. Thus between 427, when the first of his plays was performed, and 385 when he died, he wrote forty plays at the rate of about one a year.

The comedies of Aristophanes are quite unlike those of any other dramatist. This may explain why, although he has always been highly regarded, his comedies have had very little effect on subsequent European drama, while that of the three tragic dramatists has been prodigious. The most obvious reason for this lies in the sharp topical satire of his plays, a reason, no doubt, why throughout history a large number of comedies which depended for their success on topical references have been meaningless in other times and places. But the greatness and uniqueness of Aristophanes lies in his practice of placing quite ordinary characters or contemporary figures, whom he usually identifies by name, in situations of extreme fantasy. Like Euripides he lived most of his life at a time when Athens was engaged in a disastrous war and much of his satire is directed at those whom he thought were, if not responsible for the defeat of Athens, at least contributing to a general decadence. Thus in *Acharnes* (*The Acharnians*) which was staged in 425 when he was in his early twenties, he makes fun of the Athenian

magistrates for their conduct of the war and ridicules one of the city's leading politicians who put him 'on the mat' for his impertinence. In *Hippeis* (*The Knights*, 424) he suggests that Kleon, who had succeeded Perikles as a leading politician, was making such a mess of things that he might be better replaced by a sausage-seller. The knights were the Athenian aristocracy of whom Kleon was a distinguished member. In *Sphekes* (*The Wasps*) he satirizes the enthusiasm of the Athenians for litigation and their unwieldy jury system.

Eirene (*Peace*, 421) is one of his most delightful fantasies. The war-weary Trygaeus flies to Heaven on the back of a dung-beetle to remonstrate with Zeus about the continuation of the war but finds that the gods have emigrated and left their celestial abode to the Demon of War who is pounding up the Greek states in a gigantic pestle and mortar, while the goddess Peace has been shut up in a cave. On his return to earth he organizes representatives of the Greek states to help pull her out, only to meet with fierce opposition from the manufacturers of helmets, spears, and breast-plates, the armament manufacturers, who see themselves going out of business.

Some people consider his masterpiece to be *Ornithes* (*The Birds*, 414). This comedy is about two men who, disgusted with life in Athens, fly to the land of the birds, Nephelococcygia (Cloud-cuckoo-land) where they build an ideal city only to be harassed by all the tradesmen of Athenians who want to cash in on a good thing.

Batrachoi (*The Frogs*, 405) was written when the death of Euripides had left Athens without a major playwright. Dionysos, disguised as Herakles, goes to Hades to retrieve a distinguished dramatist but finds Aeschylus and Euripides arguing about their respective skills. This was the second play he had written involving Euripides which suggests what a controversial figure the great dramatist had been. In 411 or 410 he had written *Thesmophoriazusai* (*Women Celebrating the Festival of Thesmophoria*) which recounts how Euripides, hearing that the women of Athens, angered by his treatment of their sex, were planning to put him to death, persuades a relative to dress up as a woman, gatecrash the assembly, and plead his cause.

Perhaps the most accessible of all his plays, and the one that is most frequently revived, is *Lysistrata* (411) in which a council of women, led by Lysistrata, disgusted with the continuance of the war, band together to declare a sex-strike, banishing their husbands from their beds until peace is made. This move quickly brings the opposing Athenians and Spartans together in the cause of peace.

These extraordinary plays are written with tremendous vitality, in exquisite verse, and with even greater metrical variations than are to be found in tragedy. They centre round the chorus who in most cases

supply the title of the play. The plays have an extremely formal structure with two parts separated by what was called a *parabasis* in which the chorus dropped any attempt at illusion and addressed the audience on a wide range of topical issues.

Although, as has been said, Aristophanes had little influence on succeeding generations of playwrights and was never copied, it was comedy which for many centuries was the dominating form of drama. Absence of genuine democracy and the freedom of expression that goes with it ensured that the theatre would almost never again have that liberty of comment that was enjoyed by Aristophanes. But why no other dramatist essayed the poetic fantasy of which he was so great a master is a question to which there is no answer.

In the absence of source material far less has been written about Athenian comedy than tragedy. Frances Cornford's The Origin of Attic Comedy *is invaluable.*

Aristophanes poses almost insuperable problems for the translator. While a detailed appreciation of his jokes and jibes requires a close knowledge of Greek, the general fun and fantasy of his plays are not difficult to appreciate.

14 | Athens in the Fourth Century

Athenian ambitions to be the political leader of a confederation of Greek states were finally destroyed by the Spartans at the battle of Aegospotami in 405. It is understandable perhaps that in the shadow of this deeply humiliating experience the Athenians should have looked for a scapegoat beyond the incompetence of their generals. Plato, who was twenty-two at the time, was critical of the sensationalism of tragedy. Aristophanes, who was critical of the conduct of the war, suggests in *Clouds* that the casuistical arguments of philosophers such as Sokrates, who could turn plain truths upside down, must take a share of the blame. Sokrates himself fell foul of the authorities for having questioned the validity of certain aspects of democratic government, and in a celebrated and infamous episode, described by Plato in the *Apology*, he was imprisoned and condemned to death by drinking hemlock.

Yet the new century was not a period of social and political deprivation for the Athenians. Two groups of people prevailed, the merchants and the philosophers. Having failed to become the political leader of the Greek states, Athens became the intellectual leader. Isokrates, one of the great teachers of the period, wrote in 381 that 'Athens has so outdistanced the rest of the world in power of thought and speech that her disciples have become the teachers of all other men'; and it is certainly true that the works of Plato and Aristotle and their school have had a greater effect on the development of European culture than those of any other thinker with the exception of the Jewish prophets and the early Christian bishops.

During the fourth century the Athenians paused and took stock of their position. They considered the past and the future, the nature of man and his relationship to the gods and to the *polis*, the city-state. And they developed in a practical manner their proclivity for trade. The Greek mainland is far too rocky to sustain an agricultural community and the country has little mineral wealth. The Greeks saw that their future lay in what Homer described as 'the wine-dark sea'.

It was a poor time for Aristophanes's armament manufacturers whose offices were taken over by brokers, agents, and bankers. But an expanding mercantile economy created a need for workers and an additional labour force was at hand in the slaves. While no one would wish to justify the use of slave-labour – though Aristotle does just that in his book on politics – the position of slaves in fourth-century Athens was in no way despicable. Social disruption and the loss of many able-bodied men caused by the war provided the slaves with opportunities to win their freedom. They exploited the security that had been provided by a good master, took further opportunity to educate themselves, and went on to fill the clerical grades in the vastly expanding Roman civil service.

The Athens of 320 BC was an entirely different place to what it had been a hundred years earlier. Gone was all pretension to political leadership, gone the democratic constitution, gone what was in some respects a heroic age. Athens had become a busy commercial centre, its streets full of merchants, their wives, their sons and daughters, and the curious social instability that grows up around ports where men from other countries drop in for a night or two.

It is a theme of this book that while the theatre is not an immediate reflection of the society of which it is an important aspect, it functions within certain limits laid down by that society. One would not expect to find the plays of Sophokles written at any other time or place than Athens in the fifth century BC. At the same time, the drama, like any other art, is not necessarily a precise expression or reflection of that society, since social reality is transformed by the creative imagination

of the artist into a new fictional reality. Nevertheless this transformation can only take place within certain limits established by what can be called the spirit of the age, whether that spirit is established by philosophical ideas, historical traditions, economic pressures, or anything else.

It is only by considering the kind of changes that took place in Athenian society between the death of Aristophanes and the emergence of what is known as the 'new comedy' that one can hope to understand the transformation that took place in the writing of comedy in the space of much less than a hundred years.

15 | Menander and the New Comedy

Menandros (342–292), as he was called in Greek, was the leading exponent of what has been termed 'new comedy'. Indeed, he is the only dramatist of the period of whom anything is known and that is little enough. He was born of a good family, he was unpopular with the critics, and died at the age of fifty while bathing. He is thought to have written about a hundred plays but there may be duplication through confusion of titles. Of this great output only five plays survive in anything approaching recognizable form. The main source of our knowledge about Menander comes from the plays of the Roman dramatists, Plautus and Terence, who translated and adapted them into Latin.

His imaginative scope is extremely limited. An Alexandrian Greek, writing in the third century, had this to say about the comedy of Menander: 'Confrontations of husband and wife, father and son, master and slave, unexpected reversals of circumstance, raping virgins, suppositious children, recognition by means of rings and necklaces, these are the main constituents of recent comedy.'

Yet another Alexandrian critic, writing in the third century BC, says 'O Menander and life, which of you imitated the other?' This rhetorical question may have been occasioned by Menander's skill in depicting ordinary human beings. This impression of reality may also have been created by his verse which is fluid and flexible and far closer to what was probably vernacular speech than the great poetry of the fifth century.

Nevertheless what deterioration had taken place! This was not only

the result of profound social changes in Athenian society but of changes in the structure of the theatre itself. The dramatist was no longer the dominating element. And we shall see throughout the history of theatre that whenever the creative energy of the dramatist flags, the actors take over; and although they bring a unique quality to theatrical art they impose a limitation on the creativity of the dramatists who tend, for example, not to create characters but repetitive types that suit the capabilities of the players. In seventeen of Menander's plays of which more than a hundred lines survive, there are, for example, four young men called Moschion, meaning 'little bull calf', and three country lads called Gorgias. He also wrote a number of standardized parts for soldiers who are usually called Polemon, from the Greek word *polemos* meaning war, or Stratophanes from *stratos* meaning army.

This tendency to fall back on what might be called social archetypes tends to happen in any theatre where masks are used. For although a mask carries its own theatrical quality it militates against the creation of original characters with their own fresh faces. Another limitation on the originality of playwright's invention tends to derive from Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of plot. If a playwright begins to write with a preconceived plot in his mind the characters will be subservient to that plot. But plot must be responsive to character. The development of an original story must depend on the subtle interplay between the characters concerned and the actions to which the characteristics of these characters give rise. The total submission of character to plot tends to create lifelessness; the total submission of plot to character leads to formlessness. The masterpiece requires a powerful organic relationship between the two. It was many hundreds of years before this happened.

It is interesting to note the persistency with which the chorus maintained its position in comedy. In the plays of Menander and the new comedies, the chorus has no role in the action of the play, but took the form of a band of revellers known as a *komos* who came on stage at various breaks in the action of the play and sang songs on a variety of subjects, usually irrelevant to the action. These interventions were known as *embolima*, a word that can almost be translated as interlude, a form of drama of which there will be a good deal to say in due course. It is probable that it was from these interventions of the chorus, breaking up the action of the play, that there developed the practice of dividing a play into acts. Menander was the first to do so, but why, or why five acts, no one knows.

This is not a period in the history of the theatre that has been the subject of much critical commentary. F. H. Sandbach's The Comic Theatre of Greece and Rome *is recommended.*

16 The Hellenistic Theatre and the Artists of Dionysos

It is a strange fever that suddenly drives a hitherto peaceful nation to take up arms and go abroad to conquer, subdue, or annex other people and other lands. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians and the Persians had at various times all caught the disease which Marxists attribute to powerful economic pressures and rivalries. The Greek people themselves were descended from invaders who had overrun the country from the north and then in turn had indulged in a limited form of aggression when they had besieged Troy and reduced it to a smoking ruin. But this was a struggle that may be seen to have been waged, less picturesquely but more pragmatically, for control of the Bosphorus through which a large part of the prosperous Asiatic trade had to pass. It was not in a spirit of adventure but of gain that Jason and his gang went in quest of the golden fleece. Wool was as precious a commodity to ancient Greece as it was to medieval Britain.

There are many reasons, however, for which men will explore foreign lands and settle down elsewhere than in their own country. The need for space and freedom are two of them. The Greeks were enthusiastic settlers. In the eighth century, the great age of the migrations, Greek colonists sailed east and settled along the coast of Asia Minor, then Ionia, now Turkey, and west as far as Italy and Sicily.

When the Athenians in their turn became aggressive they received their come-uppance from Sparta in 404; but peace did not last for long in the eastern Mediterranean. Trouble came next from the Macedonians, a somewhat military people of Greek stock who lived to the north of the Greek mainland. When Philip II of Macedon was assassinated in 336 he had become virtual master of Greece. He was succeeded by Alexander the Great (356–323) who, by the age of thirty-three, had overrun and subdued the whole of Egypt, the Middle East, Persia, and a large part of India. He was both an able administrator and a brilliant general, and since as a child at his father's court he had had no less a tutor than Aristotle himself he was not without cultural pretensions. It is not only trade that follows the flag but culture too, and Alexander left in the wake of his armies innumerable memorials to

Greek civilization. He founded, for example, the city of Alexandria which rapidly became one of the intellectual centres of the Hellenistic world.

So it happened that the culture of the Greek city-states was spread over the whole eastern Mediterranean and established what was known as the Hellenistic Age. Each country absorbed certain elements of Greek culture according to local conditions. Many built theatres on Greek models since they had no theatrical art of their own. By the first century BC there were some thirty theatres on the Greek mainland, fifty in Ionia, twenty in the region that is now Syria and Israel, sixty in central Italy, and a large number on the Mediterranean coast, countries that are now Tunisia and Algeria, as well as in Sicily, northern Italy, France, and the Rhineland.

Following the great age there was a decline in both the number and the quality of new plays, and the actors took over. Their importance can be dated from 449 when prizes for tragic actors were introduced at the City Dionysia and from 440 for actors in comedy at the Lenaia. With few new plays being written and an increasing number of revivals, the interest of the audience was switched from play to players whose contrasted interpretation of the great roles became a subject of considerable interest.

Such was their growing prestige that companies of actors not only toured extensively in Attica but increasingly throughout the Greek world. The more distinguished were granted diplomatic status and carried out negotiations between one city and another. Alexander was particularly enthusiastic about actors and musicians and organized contests and festivals on a lavish scale in the course of his aggressive perambulations.

By the third century dramatic festivals had become widespread throughout the Hellenistic world and were no longer confined to the spring festival of the god Dionysos. The result of this enormous and widespread demand for actors and musicians was that performing artists were obliged to organize themselves. The first of these guilds was known as the Artists of Dionysos. It was formed in about 280 and based in Athens. It was followed by others. Membership included not only actors of tragedy, comedy, and satyr, but singers, instrumentalists, rhapsodes, and bards, and those who trained the choruses.

The performer's art is notoriously evanescent. Our only source of knowledge of the activities of actors in the Hellenistic world is a variety of inscriptions on public monuments. These have been painstakingly recorded by Sir A. W. Pickard-Cambridge in Athenian Dramatic Festivals. *But many Hellenistic theatres, reasonably well-preserved, have survived and are described, with photographs, in Margaret Bieber's* The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre.